

Legend of the Condor Heroes

Prologue

THE YEAR IS 1205. FOR DECADES THE SONG EMPIRE HAD BEEN fighting an invasion from the north by the Jurchen tribes of Manchuria.

Skilled horsemen and keen archers, the diverse Jurchen tribes were first united under the charismatic chieftain Wanyan Aguda in 1115, after which they set their sights on the riches of their Han Chinese neighbours. Within ten years of unification, the newly established Jin Empire had taken the Liao Empire's southern capital, the city that would be captured and recaptured under successive dynasties and eventually be known as Yanjing. A brief alliance between the Song and the Jin Empires against the Liao Empire brought peace to the plains of Manchuria. However, after the Jin attacked and captured the Song capital in Bianliang not two years later, the Song had been fighting the Jin ever since. Successive defeats had pushed the Song further south, past the Yangtze River and the Huai River, much to the anxiety of the Chinese who had fled with their Empire to safety.

The Huai River had long marked the psychological boundary between north and south China. The south was lush in comparison with the northern steppes and central plains, its landscape criss-crossed with rivers and spotted with lakes.

The climate became hotter and more humid, wheat fields gave way to rice paddies, and karst peaks rose high into the clouds. Having always been far from the capital in the north, this was a landscape that had long resisted the taming forces of the Empire, where the Great Canal's manmade torrents flew into the wild rapids of the southern rivers.

But for all its seeming lawlessness, the soils of the south had proved fertile ground for the fleeing Song Empire. Here they had established one of the world's largest cities, Lin'an, a bustling commercial centre of towering, overcrowded wooden buildings, grand stone courtyard houses, stalls selling pork buns and steaming bowls of noodles, as well as elegantly decorated tea houses serving the finest imperial delicacies of crispy duck, steamed crab, and badger and goose meat.

Despite its grandeur, however, this is a troubled city. The local Chinese population could not be sure if their officials were working for them, or for the Jin. In the surrounding villages, food was scarce as the Empire diverts resources from hardworking farmers into the army's fight against the Jin, lining their pockets as they did so. Taxes were crippling and the officials who were supposed to protect them seemed to care little for their plight. Far from being a civilising force, the Empire appeared to be little concerned for its citizens, and was rather more interested in making its officials rich.

For while the Empire regards the south as unruly, law and order in this part of China was in reality maintained by a proud community of men and women who had trained for years in the martial arts. They name themselves for the symbolic landscape of rivers and lakes that was their home, the martial world, or even the martial forest, the martial arts world, both metaphors for their community.

Organised into sects, schools, clans and bands of sworn brothers, or even travelling as lone wanderers of the martial world, they lived by a moral code they called xia. Rivalries between the sects and martial artists are fierce, moves were jealously guarded, and disputes were settled by hand-to-hand combat. But on one thing they were united, the ineptitudes of Song Empire must not be allowed to destroy their country.

Fuelled by patriotic fervour and anger at the corruption eating away at the Empire, a rebellion is taking hold of the countryside. It was up to these martial arts masters of the south to save their country from complete destruction at the hands of the northern tribes.